

Men's Health

NOVEMBER 1998 £2.90

ARRRRGH!

He's going to kiss me

Bad breath happens to most of us at some point, quite often first thing in the morning. We know this because as we exhale, the wallpaper droops. And the person we expected to be next to us when our eyes open is stalking the room in an orange boiler suit and face mask, dousing all surfaces with industrial fumigant.

We've all been there, and time and mouthwash generally sort it out. But, according to Dr Mervyn Druian at the London Breath Centre, for ten to 15 per cent of us it's not that simple. These people have chronic problems, and it's no laughing matter, for them or anyone downwind.

"This morning," says Dr Druian, "I saw a young man in his late twenties who came in to have his gums cleaned. He hadn't been to a dentist for seven years, he smokes maybe 20 to 25 cigarettes a day, drinks the normal amount. I couldn't go near him. I asked him if he knew he had bad breath - which is a very hard thing to ask anybody - and he was actually very insulted."

So one of the difficulties in treating bad breath is getting people to realise they've got a problem to begin with? "Absolutely," agrees Dr Druian. "I ask people why they've come here and they say they've got a funny taste in their mouth, for example. They won't actually come out and say they've got a breath problem. It's very emotional and extremely personal. We do a lot of cosmetic work here, and I've never had a problem

magazines to talk about having their teeth whitened or cosmetic work done, but as for case histories of bad breath... no way. It's one of the last stigmas. That and body odour are things that people just can't face, and it's very difficult to tell people, especially because people don't notice their own body odours. That said, most people have got some idea if they've got a problem."

The effects can be devastating on sufferers' social and professional lives, and even their psychological health.

"We get patients who continually talk with one hand in front of their mouth, or who won't look you straight in the eye, or who always look away when they speak to people. They are very sensitive to it. I had one patient who came all the way from Hull whose job was under threat. His company

and finally told him that if he didn't sort the problem out, his job would go, because people couldn't work with him. We managed to sort that one out. We also had a lady from Birmingham who, after being told by one of her kids that she had bad breath, just refused to go out."

There is hope, however, even if you are at the stage where your local police force want to retain you as a means of crowd control.

"I've only been defeated when patients come so late that every tooth is loose. Even if they come a few stages before that, there are still things we can do. Usually after their first or second visit to a hygienist things are really improving."

How's it caused?

According to Dr Druian, the problems that cause 90 per cent of bad breath cases are in the mouth - not, contrary to popular myth, in the stomach. Anaerobic bacteria accumulate in airless places like the crevices on the tongue and, crucially, in the gaps between the teeth and the gums. This is especially true in people with gum problems.

When these bacteria die, or break down proteins from dead cells and food debris in the mouth, they give off unpleasant sulphurous gas (anyone remember stink bombs?). When things are working properly, the mouth's supply of saliva is enough to

Does the smell from your mouth bend spoons faster than Uri Geller? Andrew Mueller investigates the causes of bad breath - and what to do about it

dries up, you have problems, which is why such dehydrating activities as sleeping with your mouth open, talking a lot, skipping meals, consuming a lot of coffee, or drinking too much beer and waking up in a skip can leave you with that oh-dear-my-palate-has-been-replaced-with-birdcage-lining feeling. Dr Druian again: "I had a patient who was a lawyer, who would go whole days without eating - no breakfast, no lunch, and nothing but coffee until dinner. His breath was terrible. Once we got him to at least have some fruit in the morning and a sandwich at lunchtime, he improved rapidly."

The ten per cent of bad breath cases with causes other than oral ones often have their roots in more serious medical problems.

"Obviously," says Dr Druian, "it can signify that you may have serious gum problems.

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If you have serious gum problems, eventually your teeth will become loose. So by addressing bad breath, you may save your

